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ABSTRACT

Adult educators need to ask themselves two basic questions: What are the problems which adults face today? What are the services which adult education can deliver to help adults individually, and collectively, resolve their problems? For many low-income adults, the problems of high death and unemployment rates, low life expectancy rates, limited housing opportunities, unsafe environmental surroundings, and deficient food and nutrition give rise to a value system different from the middle-class orientation of the prevalent adult education participant population and the adult education profession. The profession has the responsibility of responding to the special needs of low-income adults by helping to prepare them with the credentials and skills necessary for optimum entry and progression in the labor market. The profession must also accept differing value systems and ensure that the intended clients are actively involved in the planning, development, operation, and evaluation of programs, and must design new programs and restructure existing ones to meet their needs. The profession, which includes adult educators in business and industry and the armed forces as well as those in educational institutions, has the talent. Most of the programs required to meet the educational needs of low-income adults already exist. All that is needed is the commitment. (JR)

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OPERATION BOOTSTRAP: ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAM RESPONSIBILITY

by

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"Operation Bootstrap - Adult Education Program Responsibility"

I. INTRODUCTION:

In one of his dialogues, Plato tells of the myth of the cave. There exists a cave through which a shaft of light casts a shadow on the upper wall. The occupants of the cave see these shadowy images and draw conclusions about the quality of the world outside. Then, as happens one day, one of the dwellers traverses to the upper reaches of the cave and sees this other reality first hand. The adventurous one then returns to report that there is a difference between that which was directly perceived by him and that indirectly perceived by the caves captives. The dwellers refuse to believe him. More importantly, satisfied with their own ignorance, they steadfastly refused to explore this other world in order to confirm or reject their own beliefs.

I submit to you that we, as adult educators, find ourselves in a position like that of the cave - dwellers. Unless we examine our relationship to our clients and the relationship of adult education to the larger American society we will have denied the existence of another reality. To avoid this classical error we need to ask ourselves two basic questions:

1. What are the problems which adults face today?

2. What are the services which adult education can deliver to help adults individually, and collectively, resolve their problems?

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT:

A. What are the problems which adults face today?

1. Problem: Disparities in Wealth -

Many adults face problems which are militated by the increasing disparities in wealth based on race/ethnicity, sex, and age. These disparities in turn affect the way in which our society organizes itself. At present we have organized ourselves with the poor and very wealthy living in our urban areas and the moderate to affluent living in our suburban areas. The fact that the greater proportion of non-whites are found within our low-income populations has exacerbated our social relations.

2. Problem: Differing Value Systems -

Different sets of adults have different value systems. Education, in general, has focused on the middle-class value system and has delivered services to the subscribing population. Those individuals and groups who have sought, or been compelled, to attend schools to receive an education have been forced to adopt the middle-class value system or to drop-out. This condition is also characteristic of Adult Education in America.

3. Problem: Insensitivity to Needs of Low-Income Adults -

Most Adult Educators live in the same communities wherein reside the typical participant in Adult Education[1]. This condition necessarily raises the question of the ability of the profession to:

- understand the nature of a substantial section of the adult population who have low income family status; and,

- even, if the prerequisite knowledge and understanding existed, to develop a philosophy and programs which are aimed at: (a) addressing low income family problems in their societal context, and (b) helping these populations to cope with their deprivation and, hopefully, to overcome it.

Discussion:

1. America is fast becoming a nation divided into "Have's and Have-nots", with women and non-white minorities constituting a disproportionate share of the "Have-not" population. Data available suggest that racism and sexism militate against equal opportunity for education, employment, health, income and even life expectancy:

a. A death rate four times that of the majority[2].

b. A life expectancy rate which is, for Black males, 8-10 years less than that of white males and 10-12 years less than that of white females[3].

c. An unemployment rate which hovers at twice that of the majority[4], for Black teenage males it is three times that of the majority[5], and for Black teenage females, it is almost four times that of the majority[6].

The percentage of Black families living in poverty is more than three times that of the majority. In 1972, median family income was $11,116 for all American families. For white families, the median was $11,549, almost twice that of Black families, which was $6,864[7].

Minority families headed by a women are twice as likely to have incomes below or at poverty level[8].

There is a high correlation between income and education attainment. Those young people with top ability from the highest income group are almost twice as likely to attend college as those from the lowest. A high proportion of the third ability group from the highest income families go to college than of the top ability students from the lowest income families[9].

Low-income family status for adults places constraints on the options which an individual can exert in his/her behalf. Low-income status affects other aspects of one's development and environment:

a. Housing opportunities are limited. One has no recourse but to live in deteriorated housing.

b. Environments tend to be unsafe. There is greater exposure to crime, drugs, and other deviant behavior which affects self and how others perceive the individual.

c. Food and nutrition are directly affected. Inadequate food and nutrition are directly linked to prematurity at birth, retardation in physical and mental development, high incidences of illness, lethargy, and other maladies which preclude full human development.

This, then is the reality which faces a substantial section of our adult population. The spectrum of poverty, poor housing, alienated youth, drugs, crime, and low-waged employment constitute their reality. This group is quite different from the typical participants in Adult Education who tend to:

a. enjoy an above average income;

b. work full time, often in white collar jobs;

c. be white, Protestant;

d. live in an urbanized area - more likely to be a suburb;

e. be a college graduate;

f. be active in other aspects of community life[10].

2. The socio-economic characteristics of the prevalent Adult Education participant population and the composition of the profession raises a complimentary set of issues regarding recognition of competing value systems, perception of client needs, and the ability of adult education programs to respond.

Assuming, however, that there is a legitimate role for Adult Education to play in American society, a secondary question becomes, "Adult Education for whom? and under what conditions?" Research studies indicate that a significant number of low-income adults who participate in Adult Education programs come with an "economic orientation", while higher income participants have a "self-actualization orientation"[11]. Given the special needs of this population, and, at the same time, a faculty which does not have women and minorities present to the extent represented in the client population[12], how can programs be expected to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of the neediest. Congressman Quie raised the same issue, but in a different way:

> "Why hasn't society recognized this need as quickly as it should? One reason is that those adults who have the greatest need for adult education have been least equipped to communicate their need"[13].

But, in addition to problems with communication of needs, the neediest are also the most difficult to reach. Unlike middle-income adults, low-income adults often do not belong to visible organizations. Strategies, therefore, must be devised for either working with the few organizations which probably do exist (local churches, and social clubs) or, where necessary, creating the organizations which will attract the population[14].

The value system which postulates that knowledge is an end in itself and should be pursued throughout one's lifetime is but one system. Research related to characteristics of adult education program participants and their motivation of participation, indicates that this constitutes a major category of participations[15]. However, other research indicates that another portion of participants participate because education is viewed as a means to an end[16]. For many, adult education participation fills social needs, enables adults to meet formal requirements for upward mobility in employment, and to fulfill religious obligations[17].

While it is true that there is a high correlation between education and income, only recently have civil rights and minority organizations questioned the prerequisites of credentials for all forms of employment.

The basic question for us as Adult Educators is: To what extent are our assumptions about the need for continued education throughout one's adult life, a function of the market place or a function of the profession's propaganda or, a reflection of an alien value system? A society predicated on meritocracy and upward mobility requires that, as education level rise, requirements for status (money and satisfactory employment) rise concomitantly. However, there is the alternative perception of society that individuals should be able to exert influence over their own lives throughout their lifetimes. There is a need, therefore, for Adult Educators to re-examine the basic assumptions of their profession and some of the tenets underpinning the motivations of non-participants as well as participants.

Adult Education presently is not responsive to the needs and concerns of groups other than middle-class adults. It must make a commitment to the establishment of goals and programs which are client-centered and espouse client advocacy. Such commitment will involve a restructuring of the manner in which it does its business. This latter condition, is a prime responsibility. Without this reform we invite continued criticism of our profession and programs, increased isolation from populations with the greatest need and the inability to play a major leadership role in the field of education.

3. If Adult Education is for everyone, and if the neediest, don't communicate their needs, how can responsive programs be developed? One avenue is obviously to go to the population to be served to ask them about their perception of their condition and elicit their responses. All the studies on motivational research suggests that there are many benefits to be derived from involving participants and potential participants in making some decision related to the planning and organization of their educational experiences[18]. Among these benefits are those such as increased morale, high satisfaction, and greater commitment to participation[19].

Recent studies indicate that populations previously omitted in adult education programs and those with high attrition rates do desire to participate and will do so, given (1) the opportunity, and (2) quality education responsive to their needs. In one study with older adults (sometimes called the aged), it was discovered that due to transportation difficulties, their participation rates in the evening were extremely low. However, the availability of similar programs in residential and senior citizen centers resulted in increased participation. Additionally, programs with instrumental rather than self-fulfilling forms of activities were those most desired[20].

In summary, the problems which confront many adults today are: (1) the fact of their low-income status, which inhibits the options for human development which are available to them; (2) the existence of their value orientation which is quite different than that of the Adult Education profession; and (3) the fact that the profession is insensitive to the needs of this population.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS:

Responsibilities:

B. What then are the responsibilities of the profession in terms of Adult Education program development as related to the needs of low-income adults? What services can Adult Education deliver to help low-income adults, individually and collectively, resolve their basic problems?

1. Adult Education can help to reduce the disparities in wealth which are based on lack of credentials and skills necessary for optimum entry and progression in the labor market for low-income adults. These can be done in several ways.

a. We can diminish the amount of time it takes to achieve the skills and credentials necessary for labor market entry. There already exist many programs which are alternatives to the traditional educational sequence[21], We need more of these programs in some instances and replication of these programs in others, so as to reach a larger segment of the low-income adult community.

As an Adult Educator in the District of Columbia Public School system some eight (8) years ago, I was appalled that the average adult student had to commit six to eight years to pursuit of one's education before he/she could anticipate receipt of the basic high school diploma. This condition still exists! The results are that enrollments are low; there is high turn-over, especially among low-income adults enrolled in Adult Education programs; and, money and other resources are wasted.

b. We must train our clients in the skills of labor market manipulation, which the middle-class does instinctively and unconsciously. The subtleties and nuances of negotiating for employment are skills which are teachable.

A project in adult counseling and guidance in Providence, Rhode Island, for which I have major responsibility, has this as a programmatic strategy during the pre-exit phase for its clients[22]. The project was funded to research and serve the home-based adult. In doing so, it was able to identify many of the factors which limit or inhibit adult participation in the labor market, especially as related to the entry/re-entry of blue-collar women who desire to return to the labor market. The project found that at least one-quarter of their clients possessed a negative self-image[23]. This obviously would be conveyed to the potential employer. Hence, the project designed a training program which would enable the client to undertake a more realistic and positive self-assessment in order to enhance chances for employability. Many clients have, therefore, discovered that they do have modest, and often times, high level skills, which, if presented in the jargon of the market-place, places them in a more favorable employment status.

c. We can do some "fine-tuning" of skills which low-income adults already possess. This is quite different from the strategy just suggested. While "window-dressing" can help some low-income adults, many need additional training. These adults are those who are members of the peripheral labor force, who have worked at a variety of jobs. However, they lack a high degree of skill in any one job area or set of job areas. A skills-diagnostic would identify what skills are maximally possessed, as well as, sensitive counseling to assist the adult in determining that set of skills which he/she wishes to hone, in combination, would allow the adult to achieve the high level of skill and accompanying motivation which is necessary for entry to better paying employment.

Finally, there is the need to widen the horizons of the low-income adult regarding the employment/education opportunities. Studies show that lack of information about changes in the labor market on the part of both low-income adults and their families and the practitioners who serve them, discourage risk-taking in searching for employment and higher education aspirations[24]. Many low-income adults' perceptions of the labor market are colored by an earlier reality. When opportunities for continued education develops, they often opt for traditional employment areas such as teaching, instead of non-traditional areas such as business administration[25]. At the same time, counselors for this population are often unaware of new opportunities, especially for women and minorities, in blue collar and non-traditional employment areas and counsel their clients not to enter unions or to pursue certain education programs because future employment opportunities are limited[26].

2. The second major responsibility of Adult Education programs is that of acceptance of differing value systems. This process of acceptance can be facilitated in many ways, but I shall mention the most obvious ones. The profession can go to the clients for whom the programs are intended and elicit their desires regarding program development. It can also actively involve the intended clients in the planning, development, operation, and evaluation of the programs.

Research has shown that Adult Education Programs (a) must serve the purposes based on the needs of the intended clientele; and (b) those purposes must rank very high on the value scale of the individual participant[27].

The heuristic import of this seems obvious. If the client perceives a disparity between his/her goals and needs and that of the goals of the Adult Education program, the client will either opt not to attend or will soon drop-out of the program. More concretely, if the low-income adult comes to the Adult Education Program with an "economic orientation" (desire to gain skills for employability), but the orientation is that of "self-actualization", the low-income adult will not participate.

We Adult Educators must seek out this population and demonstrate our recognition and acceptance of them and their value system on its own merits. Economic orientation is as legitimate as self-actualization and that value system's integrity should not be contingent upon the acceptance or rejection of same by the profession.

Of course, there is always the possibility of recidivism in the profession, once the commitment is made. To prevent this from happening, I am suggesting the inclusion of the intended clients in the planning, operation, and evaluation of Adult Education Programs. Motivational research has shown that there is much to be gained when the intended recipients of the service are involved in the design of it[28]. Among these gains are those of increased enrollment, greater self-satisfaction, and more effective program development[29]. The acceptance of these other value systems should lead to criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced programs.

3. The need for criterion-referenced programs lead to my final charge to the Adult Education Profession. There is a need for the profession to demonstrate its sensitivity to the needs of low-income adults through the design of new programs and the restructuring of existing ones. We need to develop a taxonomy of adult needs at the

various major stages of adult human development. We need to then identify those existing programs which address the needs of adults, especially those of low-income adults. We need to identify those new programs which are needed to add to our knowledge about adult needs and/or provide a service not yet developed for neglected populations.

There is already in existence various programs which qualify. We need to tap these resources and expertise which presently exist in the profession. By the profession, however, I do not mean only those in public and private educational institutions, but I include as well those Adult Educators who work in Business and Industry, and in our Armed Forces. The historically Black colleges and universities have been successful in moving the most disadvantaged of low-income Black adults into the economic mainstream. We need to collate these contributions and disseminate them to other institutions and programs which now have similar low-income populations as clientele. The same is to be said of many of our community and junior colleges in are large urban corridors.

In short, there is much that we can learn from each other; we have the talent[30], we have most of the programs we need to respond to the educational needs of low-income adults. All we need now is the COMMITMENT! I am suggesting that this statement of commitment become the major resolution of the Adult Education Department at this Convention and that the profession report to its own department and the convention, its progress as related to that commitment at its next annual meeting.

We can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, if we but will to do it!

I have been speaking to you today about another reality. It is a reality which I have seen and continue to see; which I have experienced directly and continue to experience. I urge you not to become safe and smug cave-dwellers. I urge you to listen to the voices of those within your professions, of the most vocal of the disadvantaged clients, of those concerned professionals like myself, and to make the deliberate choice and commitment to respond to the needs of the neediest of our adult population.

Footnotes

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6. Ibid.

7. Ibid, p. 316

8. Women's Bureau, "Facts on Women Workers of Minority Races", (U.S. Department of Labor, April, 1974), p. 4.

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11. Mohammed Douglah and Gwenna Moss, "Differential Participation Patterns of Adults of Low and High Educational Attainment", Adult Education, Vol XVIII, #4, Summer, 1968.

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13. Albert H. Quie, "The Challenge of Lifelong Learning", Adult Leadership, (Vol. 21, Number 6, December 1972), p. 182.

14. Eli Ginzburg and D. Hiestand, "The Guidance of Negro Youth", Employment, Race, and Poverty, A.M. Ross and H. Hill, eds., (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967), p. 439.

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16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. See #10 above, pp. 94-5.

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20. Roger P. Hiemstra, "Continuing Education for the Aged: A Survey of Needs and Interests of Older People", Adult Education, Vol. XXII, Number 2, Winter 1972), pp. 100-108.

21. See Report of Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 1973; Patterns for Lifelong Learning, 1973; and Less Time, More Options, Report of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1971.

22. Education Development Center, Proposal to the National Institute of Education - Home/Community-Based Career Education Model III, Budget Period October 1, 1974 to March 31, 1976, (Newton, Mass.: Education Development Center, April 12, 1974), p. 127.

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24. See #12 above, p. 77.

25. Ibid.

26. J. Kaufman, et. al., The Role of the Secondary School in the Preparation of Youth for Employment, (The Pennsylvania State University: Institute for Research on Human Resources, 1967), pp. 9-32.

27. See #10 above, p. 94.

28. Ibid., p 77

29. Ibid., p. 94

30. Win Adkins, "Life Skills Education for Adult Learners", Adult Leadership, (Vol. 22, Number 2, June 1973) pp. 55-58, and Cline C. Viri, "A Bill of Rights for Functionally Illiterate Adults", Adult Leadership, (Vol. 22, Number 5, November 1973) pp. 164-168, and Thomasyne Lightfoote Wilson, Toward Viable Directions in Postsecondary Education: Nontraditional/Unconventional Education through a "Community-Family" Context, (California Postsecondary Education Commission, September 1974).